School Contexts and Student Belonging: A Mixed Methods Study of an Innovative High School

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Abstract

High schools have been described as potent breeding grounds of alienation and boredom (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Marks, 2000) while recent literature has focused on student-teacher relationships and the importance of pedagogies of care (Noddings, 1992; Wentzel & Looney, 2006). This paper examines the link between social context variables and the educational process by providing an analysis of the relationship between belongingness, teacher support, and school context. Using a mixed methods approach, the results illustrate the possibility and significance of supplying adolescent students with a sense of belongingness. Using interviews and surveys of student belongingness and teachers' support, this paper finds that schools which place greater emphasis on the developmental needs of adolescent students are more likely to foster a sense of belongingness and may, in turn, have important effects on a variety of student and teacher outcomes.

Key Words: student belonging, school contexts, climate, Experience Sampling Method (ESM), teacher support, adolescent development, high schools, engagement, LGBT issues, sexual minority, motivation, membership

Introduction

In 1974, Urie Bronfenbrenner described high schools as potent breeding grounds of alienation. Since this statement, a number of studies have found

similar results – noting both alienation and low levels of student engagement (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993a). In fact, some studies report that as many as 40 to 60 percent of high school students are consistently unengaged, chronically inattentive, and bored (Marks, 2000; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusich, 1986; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996). Recent literature has begun to focus on student-teacher relationships and the importance of pedagogies of care (Noddings, 1992, Wentzel, 1998). While others note the need for research regarding the link between social context variables and cognitive, motivational, and educational processes, a number of scholars have called for more descriptive studies that directly address the association between psychological measures of student belongingness and motivation (e.g., Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992; Weiner, 1990). This paper provides an analysis of this relationship and illustrates the possibility and significance of supplying adolescent students with a sense of belongingness. The following research question guided the inquiry: Do levels of belongingness differ in relation to school context (i.e., Are levels of belongingness higher in a school that structures itself around the developmental needs of adolescent students?)?

Theoretical Background

This study was built on a body of literature which suggests that learning relies on interpersonal factors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Ryan, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Baumeister and Leary's theory regarding belonging as fundamental to human motivation was used as a foundation for this work. Their theory suggests that the need to belong is "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). This notion has been supported over the years by many scholars. For example, Deci, Vallerland, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) discuss "relatedness" as a basic psychological need that, when provided, led to students' intrinsic motivation when used in combination with support for student's individual control and choice.

In recent years, a small body of literature on student belonging has converged to link a number of positive academic outcomes to a child's sense of belonging in school. Within this literature a variety of terms have been used in the description of belonging. These terms – belongingness (Finn, 1989), relatedness (Connell, 1990; Deci et al., 1991), connectedness (Weiner, 1990), or school membership (Wehlage, 1989) – are generally parallel and interchangeable, though all have been measured in a variety of ways. As noted above, much of this literature has focused on elementary or middle school students, "at-risk

youth" or "talented teens," but regardless of population specifics, the general theory describes belongingness as a psychological need that plays a vital role in the transmission and internalization of values and cultural norms.

Belongingness and Teacher Support

The positive outcomes found regarding children's reports of quality relationships with teachers are many. Wentzel (1998) found that students' perceptions of teacher caring are significantly linked to students' internal control beliefs, school interest, and academic effort despite differences in race or socioeconomic status. These relationships between teachers and students are especially strong and important because of the multiple roles teachers have in terms of nurturing, discipline, teaching, and evaluation. For example, in elementary school, teachers' relationships with students predict students' levels of perceived control, relative autonomy, and engagement in school (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). In early adolescence, children's feelings of teacher support predict changes in motivation outcomes, achievement expectancies, and values, as well as engagement, effort, and performance (Goodenow, 1993a; Murdock, 1999; Wentzel). A number of studies have demonstrated that teacher support may have the most direct effect on student engagement beyond the support of parents and peers (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Newmann, 1992; Ryan et al.; Wentzel), with teacher caring accounting for 47% of the variance in student engagement among high school juniors and seniors in a middle income suburban community (Freese, 1999). Thus, how students feel about and do in school is, in large part, determined by their relationships with teachers.

These relationships are particularly salient during adolescence, when students begin to explore their personal identity beyond the bounds of parents and family, often relying more heavily on relationships outside of the family for support and direction (Erikson, 1968; Steinberg, 2002). At this developmental stage, teachers can meet these needs by offering more opportunities for student collaboration and student-teacher interaction. Collaborative learning methods may address student interest by facilitating the coordination of students' social and academic or achievement goals and may help some students seek the approval of well-adjusted peers and teachers rather than strengthening their relationships with poorly adjusted peers (Urdan & Maehr, 1995). This movement toward academic approval furthers the likelihood of academic engagement and is particularly useful for adolescents who have difficulty bridging their social and academic worlds (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). Furthermore, adolescent students develop greater social cognition and have a greater ability to understand or comprehend complex social institutions (Harris, 1995; Lapsley, 1989), making the school institution a construct adolescents are apt to examine.

Context and Climate

Research suggests that future definitions of belonging must be broadened to take the unique aspects of adolescent development into account (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Finn, 1989; Newmann, 1992; Steinberg et al., 1996), while a few studies specifically stress that the influences of the social context be examined as well (Newmann, 1989; Wehlage, 1989). These scholars have noted that while there is widespread research evidence that a sense of belonging to school is critical to the success of students, little research evidence exists on how school context and climate affect students' sense of belonging. Despite the general lack of study in this arena, a few recent studies recognize the role of context as an important factor in the motivation of adolescent students (Anderman, 2002; Ma, 2003; Smerdon, 2002; Wentzel & Looney, 2006). In one such study review by Anderman (2002), only 25% of studies found in two major educational psychology journals (*Contemporary Educational Psychology* and the *Journal of Educational Psychology*) were studies of children or adolescents that incorporated at least two or more schools in the design of the study. Prior to Anderman's study which compared urban and suburban school populations, the relationships of perceived school belonging to various phenomena were not examined across multiple contexts.

Since Anderman's work, Ma (2003) found large school level effects with respect to explaining students' sense of belonging using a large sample of over 13,000 students in grades six and eight. Using Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM), school climate variables (academic press, disciplinary climate, and parent involvement) rather than school context variables (school size and school mean SES) were found to have statistically significant effects on students' sense of belonging. These findings highlight the fact that teachers have an important role in shaping student experience because school climate is generally flexible and under the control of school staff relative to school context variables. One would expect that a student's sense of belonging will differ depending on the context and climate – when students experience a sense of belongingness, they are more likely to function optimally because their needs are satisfied. The current study acknowledges the importance of context and climate in the study of adolescent motivation.

Rationale for the Study

To best examine a variety of learning contexts, this study examined in depth a public high school which claimed to structure itself around the developmental needs of adolescent students (Ketter, Morrison, Packard, & Pirtle, 2001). The following contextual variables were unique to this non-traditional high school: (1) School decisions regarding school policy; budget; public relations;

and the hiring and recruitment of teachers, administration, and students were all made by committees of students, administrators, and teachers. (2) Grades were not used to evaluate students. Rather than earning grades for a set of required courses, students earned credit. Evaluations were pass/fail based on completion of the work at an 80% level of mastery. Credit was based on the amount of work completed. (3) Curriculum and learning goals were developed by teachers and students in the form of contracts which included a significant amount of teacher feedback. (4) Class attendance was non-compulsory. (5) Classrooms were considered collaborative learning environments where teachers are partners in learning. (6) Unlike "alternative" schools and like the traditional school, the non-traditional school did *not* serve students considered "at-risk" of academic failure. (7) Teachers were given a great deal of autonomy and support in developing courses, lessons, and assessments, in student discipline, and in parent and community relations. It was hypothesized that these seven structural components would illicit higher levels of belongingness than a traditional school structure.

Method

Sample and Data

The Non-Traditional School

Starlight Academy is located in an urban center of a Northwestern U.S. city. The author collected data from this school in the fall of 2002. (Note: To assure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for both schools and for all students and teachers.) Three hundred students attended classes with a teacher-student ratio of 1:25. This non-traditional school was a democratically governed, liberal arts learning community. Students and teachers worked collaboratively and demonstrated a high degree of autonomy and pro-social goals. At the time of this study, the school had high proportions of Caucasian students (77%) compared to neighboring schools (40%). The ethnic composition of the student body was 5% American Indian, 6% Asian, 6% African American, 7% Latino, and 77% Caucasian.

Students attending the non-traditional school met or exceeded state standards in all areas of assessment (reading, writing, mathematics, and listening). Annual assessments of 9th grade students at the non-traditional school also indicated that student academic achievement was higher in 2000 and 2001 than the national average. Students consistently achieved the highest composite SAT scores among the city's high schools with average scores of 609 on the verbal section and 517 on math (Seattle Public Schools, 2003).

Beyond high standardized test scores, Starlight offered unique courses, learner autonomy, and choice that few schools rival. Course offerings included: communication arts (including world, ethnic, and American literature; poetry; and creative writing), thematic social studies, world languages, multiple levels of math and science, dramatic arts (including play production and screenwriting), environmental and outdoor education, ethno-botany, a number of internships, computer graphics, animation, desktop publishing, film studies, student designed courses, community-based learning, social justice and environmental activism, solar design, woodworking (boat building), and vocational horticulture (including organic gardening).

The Traditional School

Lincoln School was selected from a nationally representative dataset collected as a part of the Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development at the University of Chicago. It was chosen for its similarity to the non-traditional school sample in terms of city demographics (median household income), community history (both were in predominantly African American neighborhoods), school admission procedures, and student demographics (gender, grade level, and standardized test scores). Both schools are public institutions, have similar graduation rates, and lead a high percentage of students toward four-year and community colleges.

Lincoln School differed from Starlight Academy in a number of compelling aspects. The term "traditional school" was chosen as a descriptor for this school based on the following characteristics: (1) School decisions regarding school policy, budget, public relations, hiring of teachers and administration, and educational reform were made by the administration and faculty of the school with little or no student input. (2) Grades were used to evaluate students for the completion of their work, with little or no additional feedback. (3) Teachers and districts developed the curriculum and set the learning goals for students. (4) Class attendance was compulsory. (5) Lecture was the primary instructional method. (6) Students attending this school were not considered "at-risk" of academic failure. (7) Teachers were given some autonomy and support in developing curriculum, lessons, and assessments, but were required to follow the rules and guidelines of the district.

Differences between the two schools included: (1) the traditional sample was more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and appeared to experience lower SES (based on student responses which indicated that mothers of students in the non-traditional school were more likely to have attained an advanced degree in higher education; Table 1 demonstrates this comparability); (2) 10% of students at the non-traditional school and over 30% of the students in the traditional school received free and reduced lunch. These differences were

statistically significant in a chi-square analysis (see Table 1), but did not contribute significantly to the differences found in the HLM results.

Table 1. Gender, Grade, Race, and Parent Education by School

	Starlight Academy	Lincoln High	χ^2
Gender			
Male	32.5%	42.5%	
Female	57.5%	57.5%	
Other	10.0%[†]	0%	4.53
Grade			
10	50%	50%	
12	50%	50%	.000
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian	5%	0%	
Hispanic	10%	15%	
Black	2.5%	25.6%	
White	72.5%	56.4%	
Mixed Race	10%	2.6%	12.51*
Parent Education			
Father			
High school graduation or less	7.9%	27%	
Less than 4-year college degree	23.7%	27%	
Graduated from college	21.1%	21.6%	
Advanced degree	36.8%	16.2%	
Don't know	10.5%	8.1%	7.15
Mother			
High school graduation or less	12.5%	35.1%	
Less than 4-year college degree	17.5%	40.5%	
Graduated from college	22.5%	13.5%	
Advanced degree	40%	10.8%	
Don't know	7.5%	0%	17.72*

Notes: *$p<.05$

[†] Non-significant differences were found with respect to gender in this analysis as well as in subsequent analyses. Further, some students considered themselves as "other" denoting either a transition in gender orientation or a lack of affiliation with either male or female categories.

Questionnaires: Teacher Support and Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)

Belongingness was measured through both teacher support and through the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM). (Note: Questionnaires are available from the author upon request; a contact is given at the end of this article.) Teacher support information was collected from students regarding the level of support they felt from their teachers. This information was collected during a one-time questionnaire administered to the students during the week of the Experience Sampling Method (ESM; Csikzsentmihalyi, 1994). The ESM is a method by which researchers examine the experience of individuals by giving them pre-programmed wristwatches or pagers that beep at random intervals throughout the course of a week. Each time the beep sounds, individuals are asked to complete a survey that assesses their experience in that moment. Students were asked to rate the level of teacher support they experienced at their school. This variable assessed students' perceptions of how many teachers at their school were caring and concerned about their academic pursuits (e.g., how many teachers at your school show interest in you, listen to your problems, ask you about your future plans, motivate you to do your best work, discuss your personal life with you, care about you, etc.). Items were rated by the number of teachers that fulfilled the item: none (1), one (2), two or three (3), more than three (4). Data for this measure were collected from the non-traditional school sample and compared to data from the Sloan Study for Youth and Social Development (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).

Belongingness was also assessed through a measure of the PSSM (Goodenow, 1992). Data for this measure were only collected from the non-traditional school sample, and are compared to Goodenow's (1993b) results. Items for this measure were assessed on a five point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 5 = completely true) and included the following items: "I feel like a real part of this school," "People here notice when I'm good at something," "It is hard for people like me to be accepted here" (reverse coded), "Other students in this school take my opinions seriously," "Most teachers at this school are interested in me," "Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here" (reverse coded), "There's at least one teacher or another adult in this school that I can talk to if I have a problem," "People at this school are friendly to me," "Teachers here are not interested in people like me" (reverse coded), "I am included in lots of activities at this school," "I am treated with as much respect as other students," "I feel very different from most other students here" (reverse coded), "I can really be myself at this school," "The teachers here respect me," "People here know I can do good work," "I wish I were in a different school" (reverse coded), "I feel proud of belonging to this school," and "Other students here like me the way I am."

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews of students and teachers were conducted to support and expand the quantitative findings. Ten students and five teachers offered to participate in interviews. Each half-hour interview focused on student experience at the non-traditional school and how it contrasted with a more traditional school structure. Questions included: "Why did you choose to attend the non-traditional school?" "Is your school different from other schools you have attended?" "Do you generally feel comfortable at your school?" "What is it about your school that makes you feel more or less comfortable?" "How closely are the goals of the non-traditional school aligned with what actually occurs in the school?" From transcriptions, I wrote extensive case memos and identified emergent themes regarding the nature of the supports and challenges and the motivations of these teachers. This analysis revealed interactions among contextual factors. These cases were examined for emergent themes using constant comparative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two- to three-hour classroom observations were also conducted in five classrooms (one time per classroom); notes on each classroom observation informed the analysis of this study.

Results

Teacher Support

Analyses indicated that students at Starlight Academy, the non-traditional school, on average reported that more teachers fit the supportive descriptions in the survey than students at Lincoln reported (1.68, t = 7.8, p < .001). These results indicate that students at the non-traditional school felt, on average, two or three teachers at their school showed an interest in them, had concern about student problems or futures, cared for, and motivated students. These results are significantly different from students at Lincoln who were more likely to report that either no teachers or only one teacher showed caring and concern for students in such capacities.

Psychological Sense of School Belongingness

When examining students' sense of school belongingness, the students at the non-traditional school reported higher levels of belongingness (mean = 3.87, SD =.59) than students from Goodenow's 1993 study of two traditional urban junior high schools (mean = 3.11, SD = .70; mean = 3.09, SD = .61). These results indicate that students at the non-traditional school appear to be feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment.

Qualitative Findings

Along with these quantitative findings, the qualitative data gathered in interviews give a more descriptive picture of Starlight Academy. Field observations and interviews were conducted with students and teachers at the non-traditional school. These data reveal a school environment consistent with the results of the quantitative analyses. They provide striking examples that illustrate the relationship between high levels of teacher support and feelings of belongingness reported by students. The following themes emerged from the data: supportive teachers, greater learning; innovative contexts and deeper investments in learning; administrative support for teachers; autonomy for teens, safer schools; and perceptions of freedom and trust for LGBT issues.

Supportive Teachers, Greater Learning

Throughout the interviews, students and teachers made comments about community, caring, and the importance of teacher-student relationships for student learning. Of the 15 students interviewed, 12 indicated that Starlight Academy provided a sense of belongingness that they enjoyed and/or often did not feel in their other schools. The link between a sense of belongingness and student learning is made in these students' quotes as they recall sharing their interests and developing relationships with their teachers through conversations about learning. Patricia, a second-year student, had just entered Starlight after attending a series of non-traditional schools (charter schools and private Montesorri/Waldorf schools). She expressed her sense of teacher concern and caring that she had experienced in her brief tenure since the beginning of the school year. At the time of the interview, Patricia had attended Starlight for less than two months, but was clearly excited and learning:

> The teachers here actually care. If you show that you're motivated and that you have the initiative…or you have an idea of how you want to get the knowledge that the class is for, then they'll work with you to figure what's going to work best for you and what concepts you understand and how you can go about learning the stuff that you don't know.

Though not a rebel himself, Marcel, a second-year student, thought that rather than rebelling against rules, students at Starlight may be learning through relationships. He explained that at the non-traditional school, he was given an opportunity to develop the relationships with teachers that he had lacked in other public schools. These relationships allowed him to excel in ways he could not previously. When asked about why he defined his school as "feeling comfortable," Marcel replied:

The main thing that makes me feel comfortable is…communicating with teachers on a personal level. A lot of people just feel very comfortable, and it gives them ability to, um, to just be themselves here. Now, I think for a lot of kids that results in just being able to *do* school, and that's a great achievement. And then for others [it gives them the chance] to do even more, and really, really do excellent.

Innovative Contexts and Deeper Investments in Learning

Olivia discussed the non-compulsory attendance plan at Starlight and how it influenced the learning environment. She had attended non-traditional schools since elementary school; when she initially entered her previous high school she experienced classrooms full of under-motivated students:

The majority of the kids who were there didn't want to be. So, you've got all these kids crammed into this room, learning material that they either already know or don't care about. They don't want to be there in the first place. It just wasn't a good environment for people. [Here] there are options, they're not going to try and force you, whereas with [my other school], you had to learn it because they said so, and had to learn it their way, which doesn't work, in my opinion. It might work for 2 kids out of the 30 that were crammed into that room, but for the rest of them, it doesn't mean anything.

An average number of 25 hours per week of "in-school time" were required of all students at Starlight Academy during the school year. However, students were not required by classes to attend. By having credit rather than grades, students were not punished for skipping class by getting failing grades, but were simply not given the credit they need to graduate. This left some students taking on a second senior year – which was surprisingly not stigmatized like it might be at other schools. Two second-year seniors explained that staying at Starlight for a fifth year "was the best choice [they] could have made."

The change from grades to credit also altered the atmosphere of the classroom. Two students mentioned "sleeping" and "doodling" classmates in their former schools. Elizabeth summed it up when I asked her to explain what her classes were like at Starlight compared to her classes at her former school, which was also a non-traditional school:

One, the classes at [this school] are way smaller because people who don't want to learn whatever it is, don't come. So you're left with a group of kids who care about the material and are going to be quiet and do the best they can. At my other school there are too many people, and the teachers can't, because of the class sizes, work with you independently. It's like chaos.

She explained that by giving students the freedom of choice as to whether or not to attend class, teachers were actually less burdened by students who were uninterested in learning.

> Here they actually give you a choice, and they will help you make the right choices, and follow through with them. So, you choose what classes you have, you choose what coordinator you have, you choose if and when you go to class, and you choose to learn something. And if you decide not to, then that's your deal. So the teachers are left with the opportunity to work with the kids who completely want to learn.

Brendan, a fifth-year student, explained that the climate at Starlight Academy did not breed apathy, at least not in the classroom. Like Olivia, Brendan suggested that the climate generated energy rather than apathy because the people who attended classes were making a statement that they were interested by simply showing up:

> And here it's just the energy, just the feeling that the people will care so much more. It's just the greatest thing to be in a classroom where everyone, everyone is just totally into it. People here, you know, aren't afraid to care about something, and aren't afraid to, like, show that they care about it. [In my other school,] it wasn't cool to be interested in what the teacher had to say.

Administrative Support for Teachers

Beyond supportive relationships between teachers and their students, teachers' growth was also fostered through their supportive relationships with administration. Teacher interviews displayed the importance of administrator support as teachers dealt with the challenges of parent and student relationships and as teachers established relationships with the school community. Here Michael, a second-year science teacher, describes how the principal of Starlight Academy supported him as he struggled with a student and parent that misunderstood his intentions to bring a student into a classroom discussion:

> I remember there was a kid who felt like he had been shamed and completely misunderstood what had happened in a class and relayed it to his mom in way that was not realistic. She called the principal and the principal was like, "I totally hear what you're saying, and let's bring all of us together to talk, but I want to let you know, [Michael] would never do that. It just did not happen like that. He would never do that." [The principal] will stand up in those situations in a big way, and staff will do that, too.

Other teachers shared the importance of having the principals' support as they developed innovative classes, dealt with challenging student discipline

issues, and made recommendations to the school board for the future development of their school.

Autonomy for Teens, Safer Schools

Beyond a general sense of belongingness, there are implications for school safety and student learning. As noted by Bryk and Schneider (2003), urban schools experience many challenging conditions – such as low SES, poor building conditions, and class and race differences between school professionals and students – that can lead to misunderstanding and distrusting relationships. These possible problems seemed to be quelled by the sense of community fostered at Starlight Academy.

A second year student new to Starlight, Brittan shared a similar opinion:

Here teachers just approach their students more on equal footing so they're not, teachers aren't always these like big, scary authority figures that you have to like rebel against. They're, you know, they're not, you know, they're people, and they have connections with the students, and at a lot of schools, they forget that….It was much more of a conservative, much more based around the authority of the administration. It was just a classic high school. There were detentions. The teachers didn't have to teach.…The relationships were almost always on an authoritarian basis. There was no, like, sort of, it just didn't have the community that [Starlight] has.

Paul, a fifth-year history teacher, explained that knowing students well provides more trust and, in turn, more freedom for students and faculty alike.

When there's a student who does not have a relationship with an adult, they tend to not be terribly trustworthy. And when the students do, it's a lot more comfortable, and you can trust people a lot more. Um, you kind of know what somebody is and isn't capable of doing, you know how far to trust them, and they also know that you know them well enough to know that something might have their signature on it if they do it. And you also can look them in the eye and know if they're lying, usually. And so, in that sort of environment, there's so much more freedom, and so much, you know – I think that's a huge thing that other schools should learn from this school. Personalization is everything.

Perceptions of Freedom and Trust for LGBT Issues

The sense of belongingness provided at Starlight Academy further affected students and teachers in a positive way by providing support for minorities. Though few racial or ethnic minorities participated in the qualitative portion of this study, the sample population did host minorities in terms of gender

and sexuality. Starlight was a place of refuge for sexual minorities (homosexual, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual). One teacher expressed how administrative support and the openness of the school community relieved his concerns about bringing his same-sex partner to graduation and other school events, an idea that he would have been concerned with elsewhere. The school focus on building professional relationships between students and teachers helped this teacher become open to the idea of sharing his personal life with his students and colleagues. The importance of this freedom is perhaps best understood through the perspective of student Renee. For Renee, Starlight was a place of refuge. It was a place where she felt a sense of belonging and was noticed by her peers and her teachers for achieving academically rather than noticed for being different.

> The social situation here is less awkward. At my old school, I was the only out queer kid in the entire school, and so I was "the lesbian," you know? It's so incredibly hard to do that. And, here I'm just, you know, one of a bunch of queer kids, so I don't even have to worry about it, you know? Before, I felt like my only role was to bring up the queer issues, to be the person who, if teachers were talking about relationships or whatever, and they're like, "You all deserve boyfriends, [and then they look to me] or a girlfriend." You know, oh my god! That bugs me! Like, I understand that they're trying to be nice to me, but the fact that they have to go, "oh, and, and you're cool too." You know, like, "I'm okay with that." Bugs the hell out of me!

> And here the teachers are more informed. You couldn't find an out queer teacher in a lot of schools, that just wouldn't happen. And here, they do. So, when you have positive role models that help the younger generation accept it, and it helps you feel less alone. And when a lot of teachers have considered your school as a safe place that makes you feel a whole lot better. It's not like it's a predominantly queer school, it's just that it's safe.

Considering that hate crimes and intolerance exist despite the strides many minorities have gained in the last decades, this freedom was not taken lightly and is recognized as an important element of belongingness at Starlight Academy.

Discussion

Strong empirical support was found for the proposition that schools that place greater emphasis on the developmental needs of adolescent students are more likely to foster a sense of belongingness. Qualitative results suggest that the non-traditional school fostered trust through student-teacher, teacher-administrator, and student-student relationships. Through interviews, students

at Starlight Academy indicated that their school provided a sense of belongingness that they often did not feel at other schools. The context provided in the non-traditional school appears to have important effects on students' feelings of autonomy and investment in learning, school safety, and the experience of sexual minorities.

This study is valuable for a number of reasons. Research suggests that feelings of belongingness diminish as students age (Wentzel & Looney, 2006) and that the correlation between academic engagement and relatedness to teachers is stronger for older students (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999; Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Here, results indicate that older adolescents attending Starlight felt a stronger sense of school membership than younger students in the Goodenow (1993) sample. The results of the current study present a valuable example of a high school where students are feeling a sense of belonging.

In addition, this study is one of few to compare school contexts and belongingness. The findings here re-emphasize expert suggestions regarding pedagogies of care for enhanced learning experiences and for safer school environments (Darling-Hammond, Ancess & Ort, 2002; Noddings, 1992). We know that engaging students intrinsically is not realistic as a basis for instruction when students are required to attend classes and when the curriculum is largely imposed by the administration (Brophy, 1999). The unique school and classroom contexts provided by Starlight Academy may have induced higher levels of belongingness. Students simply did not attend classes if they were not interested, leaving classrooms full of relatively motivated students.

Beyond the effects of school context on adolescent students, the findings here suggest that teachers too experience greater satisfaction with their work and an openness to share their private lives with the school community when they have a sense of belongingness. This openness may be due in part to the collegiality supported by the structural arrangements of the school. Teacher workplace researchers suggest that collegiality is one of the most important organizational characteristics influencing teachers' professional commitment, performance, and sense of efficacy (Johnson, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). These findings are relevant for both teachers and students. Teacher satisfaction leads to important positive outcomes with regard to student learning. Teachers who experience job satisfaction are absent less often and are seen by students as enjoying teaching (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988, as cited in Smerdon, 2002), and this contributes to their shared sense of belongingness. Teachers that are satisfied and committed have been found to increase students' commitment to academic activities and to the school as an organization (Firestone & Rosenbaum, 1988). Thus, the commitment and satisfaction expressed by teachers at Starlight Academy may contribute to student learning and commitment. Teacher

education programs that offer time for reflection on their own "ethic of care" may help in bolstering such positive outcomes for teachers and students alike (Noddings, 2003).

Starlight Academy provided a strong example of how strong teacher-student relationships can influence student engagement and assist in creating a safer learning environment. This is of great concern for our public schools as they face the challenge of teen violence. The multitude of bullying programs, security procedures, and zero-tolerance policies developed for public high schools aim to address this violence, and while made with good intention, scholars, parents, and students alike have questioned their effectiveness in making schools safer, at least in terms of emotional safety (Delpit, 1995). Scholars suggest that by letting policy rule, we imply that we as educators do not have the ability to deal with such situations, that we are powerless to the system, and untrusting or even afraid of the students we aim to teach. Truly safe schools are founded on strong alliances between students and teachers and administration. With students outnumbering teachers in all schools, these alliances are crucial. They illustrate trust and create safe places where both students and teachers have the power to make the system work.

This study also brings our collective attention to the struggles of sexual minority youth. The struggle for fair treatment of sexual minority youth in public schools is compelling. In a nationally representative study of over 3,000 high school students, two-thirds of the sample reported that they had been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted at school during the past year because of their appearance or their actual or perceived race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, or religion (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network, 2005). Other studies find similar results (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). The current study provides the field with an example of a public school that provides a sense of safety for sexual minority youth.

Limitations of the Present Study

The implications of these findings for research and practice should be discussed in the context of the study's strengths and limitations. Limitations result from differences in the samples in terms of time, culture, and basic cohort effects. Furthermore, students were self-selected to participate in this study and also were self-selected by choosing to attend either of the schools examined in this study. Finally, the relatively small sample limits our ability to generalize the results, and the data presented are cross-sectional, thus associations identified may not be interpreted in terms of causation. Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution by examining belongingness and school contexts using a mixed methods approach.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the difficulty in radically restructuring public schools to fit the Starlight Academy model, the results of this study suggest that schools should consider the effects of teacher support and belongingness on the achievement of high school students. Considering the low levels of belongingness found in traditional high schools nationwide, public schools would do well to consider the structures implemented by the school of focus in this case study, particularly those structures that attend to adolescent needs of agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004).

Belongingness and teacher support are important and often unnoticed variables for adolescent learning. This study makes an important contribution to the literature at a time when standardized testing of academic achievement is often used as a sole indicator of student learning or as a sole criterion for evaluating the success of implemented programs. Such assessments of learning are highly limited and questioned by researchers, preservice instructors, and other educators (Eggen & Kauchak, 2000; Steinberg et al.,1996). Academic achievement is but one measurement of student success that must be used in combination with other learning outcomes. Educators would do well to consistently recognize that teacher support and adolescents' sense of school membership are important factors associated with learning and motivation.

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